FINDING TIME FOR PRAYER

Gerard Irvine

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THE CHURCH UNION
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THIS pamphlet is written for those ordinary, busy people who are trying to love and serve God while living a normal life in the modern world: in fact it is probably written for you. It is not perhaps harder for you to serve God than it was for your grandfathers—it has never been easy for anyone. But the pressure and rate at which you are living is such that nobody until the present century in the history of the world could have imagined. And this pressure makes it much harder to get to *know* God than it was for our ancestors. For the efforts at knowing God demand energy and time; and the world in which we live gives us little enough to spare of either. It is not our fault that we live at this rate; it is inevitable and we can do nothing about that. What we can do is to find how best we can get to know God in the unprecedented circumstances in which we live. We cannot find him in any other circumstances for no other exist. We can only find God in life as it is, and not as we would like it to be in a wishful fantasy. If life is rushed and streamlined, then it is in the rush the still small voice must be heard. There *is* nowhere else.

The tempo of life today gives little time for any tranquillity, and its pressures little peace for the traditional methods of finding and knowing God—prayer, meditation and Bible reading. *But nevertheless time and energy must be found.* For we cannot serve God as he requires unless we love him; we cannot love a God we do not know. Thus knowing God must come first, and prayer is an absolute priority.

What is evident is that we must make certain adjustments in the time and possibly the manner of praying which have been accepted as normal in the past. Well-known spiritual books are often very disheartening, and some of the greatest classics seem to presuppose that only those people who have unlimited time at their disposal can pray properly. And so we tend to leave most of the praying that we should be doing to other people—nuns and

priests and old ladies of leisure, contenting ourselves with trying to keep commandments and precepts, and saying some morning and evening prayers (and not always these either). We forget that many of the greatest saints who have prayed best have led fantastically busy lives, with none of those labour-saving gadgets which make it possible for us to get through the day at all.

It is the greatest mistake to suppose that the "spiritual life" is a special kind of life, which can be safely left to other people who have special capacities for developing it. The spiritual life is not a special kind of life, like the academic life or public life, or even the monastic life. It is just ordinary life lived in an extraordinary, namely a supernatural, fashion. One of the great lessons we can learn from that remarkable woman St. Thérèse of the Infant Jesus is that sanctity is not doing peculiar or great things, but humdrum ordinary things done faithfully and in the spirit of prayer.

If the ordinary things that we do are at a high rate, then we must do them for God at that rate. We must be what the Bishop of Stepney well calls "Saints at sixty miles an hour". Indeed the busier we are the more essential it is that we should make time to "make our souls". For if Satan finds mischief still for idle hands, he finds more than mischief for overtired nerves.

We must make time for prayer; it must be adequately long; and it must be a regular time. When and where we pray on the other hand are matters on which we should reasonably expect adjustment from traditional patterns of piety and meet the needs of the day.

Traditionally prayers are said morning and evening. And it is certainly good that some prayers should be said at these times. But the fact remains that on rising and before retiring are just about the worst times of the day for most of us. In the morning there is barely time to offer the day to God, dress, seize a piece of toast and gulp down the cup of tea or coffee before we have to dash to catch the train to work; or for housewives the business of getting the family off to work and school. In the evening we have all the time in the world, but are too tired to make proper use of

it. In theory we could get up earlier, and pray later at night. But if we do, we may find both our work and our prayer impaired.

The alternative is to change the times of prayer. There is really nothing more sacred about morning and evening for private prayer than there is about eleven and six-thirty on Sunday for public worship. And there is nothing particularly sacred about the bedside. If we cannot conveniently pray at these times, then let us choose another. And above all have no guilt whatever about our alternative arrangement.

True, morning prayers are the most important in the day, for by them the day falls or stands. So there is one prayer which should never be missed any morning, and that is the morning offering of the day to God. This act need not take more than twenty seconds: it can be done in the bathroom. But it should always be made; and when made it will serve to turn the rest of the day to prayer.

There is not much time for other prayers before we leave home. But what about on the way to work? In bus or train there is often half an hour which is often squandered looking at advertisements or the daily paper, but which could be used with profit for "making your soul". It could for instance be used for Bible reading—paper-bound copies of the Gospels only cost a matter of coppers and can be slipped into pocket or handbag. As an alternative (for those who find meditation on the text of the Bible hard) there is the devotion of the Rosary. No one needs to see the beads; to all appearances you might be looking out of the window or even snoozing. The experience of many generations has taught that the Rosary is the most useful prayer for distracting occasions. An introduction to it can be found in another tract in this series ('The Heaven-sent Aid').

Still better for many people is the lunch-hour; an excellent time for the main body of praying. Whenever possible use a church—particularly of course if the Blessed Sacrament is reserved there. But in every case there is bound to be some quiet place which can be found if you look for it.

And for evening prayers. By bedtime busy people are too

tired to pray properly. In this case, accept the fact and limit bedtime prayers to the minimum—an act of thanksgiving and commendation, an Our Father and a Hail Mary. There is nothing lazy about this, *provided some evening prayers have been said earlier.*

Humility as much as sense demands that we should be realistic with ourselves. We must face the fact that once we have got home and had our evening meal, it is morally impossible often to say any prayers, quite apart from the rival claims of radio or television or company. In this case it is far better to do your praying before you reach home. Take the bus to the next stop along, and drop into a church and spend five or ten minutes with God there.

Of course there is no necessity to use a church; you can pray at home, you may say. Well if you can, so much the better. But of how many can this honestly be said? Small houses, chores, children, the doorbell all conspire to make it difficult. Once again accept the fact that it is difficult, and pray where you can *away from it all.*

Housewives will of course find other times good for them; after seeing the children to school, or in the afternoon. Their distractions at home will be things that need doing, and clamour to be done at once. They too would be well-advised to use the church. They need have no self-consciousness about this after all the church is open for this purpose.

But whenever and wherever you decide to pray, make a rule about it. And keep the rule simple, one you need never fall below. This is more valuable than devising a splendid and elaborate rule you may sometimes with luck live up to. Remember that our Lord wants good prayers, not long prayers—but he also wants prayers considerably longer than many Anglicans are accustomed to give him. When or where you pray does not matter. For this you can and should without guilt or fear of the second-best suit your convenience. What is essential is that you should pray every day; for a day in which you have not prayed is a day in which you have not lived.

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